

Hollingsworth-Steel House  
931 Fell Street  
Baltimore  
Baltimore City County  
Maryland

HABS No. MD-189

HABS

MD

4-BALT

116-

PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Eastern Office, Division of Design and Construction  
143 South Third Street  
Philadelphia 6, Pennsylvania

## HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. MD-189

## HOLLINGSWORTH-STEEL HOUSE

HABS  
MD.

4- BALT

116-

Street Address: 931 Fell Street, Baltimore, Baltimore City  
County, Maryland

Present Owner: William Ziranski, 935 Fell Street, Baltimore, Maryland

Brief Statement  
of Significance: This building, probably built by Jesse Hollingsworth  
between 1782 and 1796, is one of the last eighteenth  
century Baltimore town houses surviving intact.  
About ninety per cent of the interior woodwork is  
original.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

As is usually the case with an ordinary domestic building, it is difficult to establish the exact date for 931 Fell Street. From the below evidence it appears that (1) it was built by or for Jesse Hollingsworth between 1782 and 1796, and (2) it was John Steel's dwelling from 1796 for some time. Nothing can be found regarding the architect, original builders, or original plans.

The house is located in an area of Baltimore anciently called "Fell's Point." Most of the area was patented by the Fell family in the 1760's and subdivided and sold in smaller parcels over the next three decades. It included a point of land which had good deep water around it, and became a center for shipbuilding and allied crafts. The maritime character of the neighborhood was quite distinct, as contrasted with the mercantile nature of older "Baltimore-town" further up the river. Sea captains, shipbuilders, pilots and maritime craftsmen lived here. John Steel was a shipbuilder.

In 1782 the Commissioners of Baltimore Town met at the east end of Fells Point to establish the correct street lines for Pitt Street, later called Fell Street. One Robert Long deposed that a certain stone had been in position in 1763 when he had thought to buy a lot. At that time he assisted John and Robert Lowry to lay out the foundations of a house on the west side of the street, which was now Mr. Hollingsworth's house. Some years later he also assisted Alexander McMechen to lay out the foundations of a house on the east side. /First Records of Baltimore Town and Jones Town, 1729-1797 (Baltimore, 1905), pp. 44-46./

In 1782 Jesse Hollingsworth, a prominent flour merchant of Baltimore, was possessed of a number of lots in this area. In 1796 he sold John Steel (or Steele) a part of "lot 126" on Pitt Street, which is the precise land on which the house is located. /Land Office Records of Baltimore County, volume WG vv folio 105, located in the Maryland State Archives, Annapolis. A search was made of the title of this lot from its purchase by the present owner in 1943 (volume MLP

6516 folio 496). Lot 126 was one of the old subdivisions by the Fell family. In 1792 Steel also bought lot 125 to the north adjoining from James Sterrett, and later lots 127 and 128 to the south adjoining from others./

In 1796 Jesse Hollingsworth requested a determination of the intersection of Wolfe and Pitt Streets by the Town Commissioners "in consequence of his having sold a house to John Steele to enable him to make good the same....some doubts having arisen as to the true course of Wolfe Street." Wolfe Street is the eastern boundary of the lot 126 in question. Henry Wilson deposed at that time that he was present in 1782 when the Commissioners had determined the course of Pitt Street. Ms. Early Records of the City of Baltimore, 1756-1800, Vol. 1, p. 145, also numbered 1796/10, dated December 27th, 1796. Baltimore City Archives, City Hall, Baltimore./

In 1798 John Steel was assessed for a "house and lot your dwelling" on Pitt Street to the amount of L.250, as well as for an unimproved lot adjoining. This was well above the average valuation for a house and lot, and was supposed to be about one-fifth the "true" value. Steel owned furniture worth L.70, 50 ounces of "plate" and a horse, as well as eleven slaves. His total assessment of L.1,010 placed him among the ten per cent highest assessed people in the city. Only one other house on Fell Street was assessed as high as L.100. Ms. Baltimore City Tax Assessment Field Book, 1798 (mislabelled 1801) in the Baltimore City Archives, City Hall, Baltimore. The estimate of Steel's position is from the undersigned's unpublished analysis of this book./

In the opinion of the undersigned, the house at 931 Fell Street was built before 1796, as shown from Hollingsworth's statement in December of that year. It is possible that there was a smaller house on the lot, and that Steel pulled it down and erected the present one. The tax assessment shows that there was a rather expensive house there by 1798. Long's statement about a foundation on the east side of the street in 1763 might refer to this house, but it certainly seems to belong to a later period stylistically. Hollingsworth's concern in 1782 for the exact boundaries of his property might indicate that he planned to build a new house. You will remember that he already had one on the west side of the street. Thus, the best date for 931 is between 1782 and 1796.

Robert Long was probably Robert Carey Long, Senior, then a house carpenter who later called himself "architect" and designed many buildings, including the Peale's Museum building in 1814. We have no evidence that he was associated with 931 Fell Street, unfortunately.

A two-story backbuilding, running through to Wolfe Street, was added to the house at some later time, perhaps 1840-50. It has no architectural value and is not germane to the report.

Prepared by Wilbur H. Hunter, Jr.  
Director, The Peale Museum  
Baltimore, Maryland  
August 1960

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement: This is one of the last virtually intact examples of the late eighteenth-century town houses in Baltimore. About ninety per cent of the interior woodwork is original, and the exterior is almost entirely intact. The fabric seems sound, but sash and sills are rotted, and the brickwork needs pointing.

B. Technical Description of Exterior: The building faces west-southwest and is located flush on the property line on Fell Street.

1. Overall dimensions: The house is 26 feet wide, with an alley 2 feet-six inches along the south-southeast wall to the back-yard. The house proper is about 31 feet deep and appears to be 35 feet high at the peak of the roof. A later backbuilding runs through to Wolfe Street, the rear boundary of the lot, but this will not be described.

2. Foundations: Stone with lime mortar.

3. Wall construction: Brick, Flemish bond on the front and English bond elsewhere. Brick bearing walls, timber joists. There is a chamfered brick water table about 2 feet above ground level.

4. Openings:

a. Doors: There are only three entrances - the street door, a cellar entrance at the front under the last bay to the north, and a rear door. The street entrance is through an arched opening three feet-four inches wide and about nine feet high. The door sill is a large stone, much worn; the arch is made of rubbed and gaged brick. The opening is lined with what appears to be a continuous wide board curved around the arch and running from sill to sill. The board is about twelve inches wide and one-and-a-half inches thick. The brick work of the wall is revealed outboard of the lining. The doorway is closed by a door seven feet-three inches high and three feet-four inches wide. The door is made of six panels, which are given relief on the front by applied moldings, but flush on the inside. It has a very large keyhole with an old brass escutcheon, and a very large lock was once attached on the inside. It has original butt hinges, concealed.

Above a simple wooden door lintel is a plain fan light with wooden muntins.

The cellar entrance has a stone lintel. It is now closed with a metal plate, and it is not possible to examine the steps or door, if any.

Nearly opposite the front entrance, but under the first landing of the staircase is the rear entrance. The opening is plain, with a flat arch of rubbed and gaged brick. The door is a simple paneled type, three feet wide and only six feet high.

There are now interior doorways at the first and second floor levels into the backbuilding, but these were originally windows.

b. Windows: The front facade has three bays, with two dormers in the roof. The rear facade also has three bays, but the two windows above the rear door are displaced downwards to accommodate the stairway landings. Under the middle window at the front, and at the back are cellar windows, nearly square, with segmental arched openings. They barely rise above grade, and have areaways protected by iron gratings.

On the south-southeast side wall there was one window at the first floor towards the front, but this has been bricked up although the complete interior frame and sash remains inside. Above this was another window, now bricked up and plastered over on the inside. On the third floor is a smaller window towards the rear which lights the staircase.

All windows have flat arched lintels of rubbed and gaged brick. The sills of most of the front windows are of freestone, perhaps local marble; two have been replaced with wood. Other sills are of wood. Most of the upper windows have double-hung, six-over-six light, sash. Some have been replaced with one-over-one sash.

Front windows and some others have modern louvered shutters. The windows on the first two floors were all built with interior folding shutters, and most of them are in place.

5. Roof: The roof has a simple double pitch at about a thirty degree eave angle and is covered with tin. It is probably shingled under the tin.

The front cornice is handsomely modillioned, but the rear cornice is simply boxed. Modern type of rain gutters run along the roof edge. Plain barge boarding covers the eaves.

The front dormers have arched openings with grooved pilasters and pedimental trim. The two rear dormers have rectangular windows and simple trim. The sash on the front dormers is double hung, with a square section of six lights under an arched section of seven lights.

6. Chimneys: A double chimney rises at the west-northwest side out of the roof line. The two stacks are connected by a lower brick bridge.

C. Technical Description of Interiors: The house is three stories high, plus an attic and a basement. The floor plan is simple. The front door leads into a hallway, six feet-ten inches wide, which runs back thirteen feet to a handsome archway divider. Beyond the archway the staircase rises along the wall with a passage of about three feet at the left of the staircase to the back door. From archway to back door is sixteen feet-six inches.

Just inside the door at the right is a large window, bricked up on the outside, but with complete frame and sash on the inside. Opposite this window is a doorway leading into the front room, which occupies the remainder of the width of the house, and is sixteen feet-nine inches wide by thirteen feet deep. The room is lighted by two windows at the front, and has a protruding chimney breast in the center of the short wall with a good carved mantelpiece. There are flanking cupboards carried part way to the ceiling, but they are not old.

The front room is separated from the rear room by a partition and doorway seven feet wide by eight feet-six inches high, which is closed by folding double doors.

The rear room is the same width as the front room and fourteen feet deep. It also has a protruding chimney breast with mantelpiece in the center of the north-northwest wall, but no cupboards. One window at the center of the rear wall gives on the backyard. The northern window opening is now used as a door to the backbuilding, but it is framed up like a window. A doorway leads out into the stairhall.

On the second floor there is a stairlanding, a room at the front which stretches the width of the building, twenty-three feet-six inches wide and fourteen feet deep, and a back room like that below. The front room has three windows on the street side, a protruding chimney breast in the center of the north-northwest wall, and mantelpiece. There are warming cupboards in the sides of the chimney breast. There was a window in the south-southeast wall, now bricked up. There are two doorways from this room, one from the stairlanding, and another to the back room. The former is elegantly finished with a carved lintel piece; the latter is lower and simpler. The back room is sixteen feet-nine inches wide and fourteen feet deep, and has a protruding chimney breast on the short wall, with mantelpiece. This is flanked by wooden cupboards from floor to near the ceiling, with wooden paneled doors and shelves. These are probably original. As in the first floor, there is one window and a door to the backbuilding, the latter finished off like a window with a later door.

The third floor has a stairlanding, with a side window on the landing. Ahead of the stairs is a small room with one window. To its right is a room at the front with two windows, and a door leads off to the back room, which has two windows at the rear. A door also connects the front and back rooms, but not between the two front rooms. The two north-northwest rooms have protruding chimney breasts, mantelpieces and floor to ceiling wooden cupboards with paneled doors.

The attic landing is lighted from overhead by a rear dormer. Ahead of the stairs is a small room with one dormer; to its right a room from front to back, lighted by one front and one rear dormer. The two flues come up in the attic, incline towards the center and go through the roof. Between them is a space in which is a short ladder which may lead out of a trapdoor to the roof. The attic is ceiled at about the height of the dormer tunnels, and the ladder may simply lead into the crawl space above.

The ceiling heights are: first floor, nine feet; second floor, ten feet; third floor, nine feet; and attic about seven feet.

An interior door in the staircase paneling at the first floor leads to cellar stairs, but could not be examined.

The stairway rises about seven feet from the first floor to a landing, which is lighted from a rear window, then reverses to the second floor landing, and so on to the attic. The first two flights were unequal in length, but not measured. The stairway is handsomely detailed. The first flight is paneled to the floor. The rail is continuous from first floor to attic and of a hard wood, probably mahogany, and curves gracefully around the corners. Newels are slender and classically turned, probably also mahogany. Along the walls is a shadow rail with shadow newels, the latter being delicately reeded. Balusters are slender with a rectangular cross section. Stair treads are hard pine with molded edges. Under the inboard sides of the treads are flat scroll frets of a typical "French curve" design. All soffits are plastered. The stairway is suspended from the walls without interior posts.

All floors are of pine plank, varying in size within small limits. They all appear to be original.

Walls are plastered from baseboard to ceiling; ceilings are plastered. From a damaged interior partition it could be seen that hand-rived wood lath was used and a soft plaster about one inch thick. Because of the dirty conditions, little can be said about paint color.

The first and second floor rooms and halls have plaster cornices molded over wood forms. The cornices are of a simple concave design, and not otherwise decorated. No cornices on the third floor and attic.

All frames and doors are much alike, with the exception of the first floor folding doors, and the one smaller door between the rooms on the second floor. The frames have wide, flat moldings characteristic of the period. Doors are six paneled, relatively thick, and hung with butt hinges, usually two to a door. They all seem to be old, but the original locks are all gone, and various kinds of cylinder locks and modern mortised locks have been added.

The folding door on the first floor may be original. Its framing is of the old type, and the doors seem old. The door between the front and back rooms on the second floor is anomalous. Its framing seems mid-nineteenth century, and the door is millwork of a later date. The opening is about the same as other doors in width, but lower. Perhaps this opening was made at a later date.

On the first floor the baseboards are elegantly molded, with a reeded strip, and this follows up the staircase. The baseboards on the upper floors are simpler.

There is a chair rail in most rooms with a rather flat molding. In some places this is decorated with vertical grooves in clusters of three or five.

The window trim is unusual on the first and second floors. Each window is framed from floor to cornice with a molding like that of the door frames. The sash is set back about eight inches, and below the sash is a wood panel at about the same plane. The reveal created by the setback is paneled all around; the panels at window level being folding inside shutters. This is very similar to the construction in such famous 1770 Annapolis houses as the Hammond-Harwood, although very much simpler, and is not usual in Baltimore. Windows in the stairwell, and upper floors are framed with the same molding, but only to the usual sill. Attic windows do not have the inside shutters. The inside shutters are divided into upper and lower segments, and are solidly paneled with no louvers. Some of these shutters are missing but about half of them remain.

The two mantelpieces on the first floor are elaborate, with reeding, chip-carved dentiling and what appear to be applied carvings in the form of garlands and similar decorations. The second and third floor mantelpieces are simpler with patterns in chip carving. While very interesting, none of the mantelpieces are extraordinary, and it is possible that they were made by shipyard artisans.

The principal decoration of the house is the hall archway. This kind of divider between the front door and staircase is a Baltimore characteristic of the period. The "Baltimore Room" at the Metropolitan Museum in New York has such an archway, and it came from a house of about 1795. The Peale Museum has such an archway taken from another house of that period. They are simply constructed of two pilasters surmounted by a built-up wooden arch--the space above is a plastered partition. In the case of 931 Fell Street, the pilasters are semi-oval in cross section, and nicely reeded, but without carving otherwise. The arch is paneled on its underside.

The hardware is mostly the cheap modern type.

Lighting is provided by non-descript modern electric fixtures.

There is no modern heating plant. The fireplaces mentioned have mostly been adapted for use by stoves.

#### D. Site:

1. General setting: The house sits flush on the sidewalk of Fell Street, with a narrow alleyway along its south-southeast side to the backyard. The bricked-up side windows indicate that it was originally clear on the south-southeast side. John Steel did own an adjoining vacant lot (see Part I of this report).



2. Outbuildings: A long baekbuilding is attached to the house, running through to Wolfe Street. This has not been described in this report.

3. Walks and landscaping: None.

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